

INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH OF HOPE

*'Hope' is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul –
And sings the tune without the words –
And never stops – at all –*

Emily Dickinson

A few months ago I was on the number 47 bus towards Lewisham, a pretty regular route for me, when I overheard a woman say to her friend, 'The news made me cry this morning. I just wanted to go back to bed. Everything is so awful.'

All that week, I couldn't stop thinking about what the woman had said. I began to pay greater attention to all the expressions of despair, pessimism and cynicism that I heard

from friends, family, neighbours and work colleagues. I noticed so much of this online and in the news; it seemed to me as though a dark cloud hung over us all. As I watched and listened attentively, it appeared we were doing very little but talking about how awful everything is or else were sticking our heads in the sand and praying it would all go away. It looked like hope was an endangered species, and yet I couldn't see how things could possibly improve without it.

We live in a truly amazing world, despite the very real and present troubles we face, but it seems that many of us are struggling to find hope for ourselves, for our communities or for the world at large. So many people have told me that they feel very bleak about the future, that they feel scared all the time, depressed, anxious and powerless. Although we are sometimes still able to laugh, to find joy, it seems that lots of us are hemmed in by a quiet despair. I didn't want to simply passively accept that this was the way things were. I was determined to work out how to find hope and how to hold on to it. And I wanted to help everyone else to do so too. Hope feels like the basis from which all possibilities spring; without it, positive change just does not feel achievable.

The first time I can remember hearing a story about hope was when my Sunday School teacher Mrs Hibdidge told me about Pandora's Box. I think a lot of people will recall this tale, vaguely at least, but to recap: Pandora is given a box

which she is told she must never open (yep, it's obvious where this is going). Inevitably, after a while, Pandora opens the box and all at once out fly all the evils of the world: grief, famine, death, greed, disease, anger, sorrow, pain – you get the picture.

Shocked, Pandora shuts the box, but the evils have bolted – it's too late. The earthly paradise is no more. After weeping in despair, Pandora hears a faint cry from within the box, imploring her to open it again. Presumably she decides that it probably can't get much worse, so she does.

Then out flies Hope – tiny, golden, plucky Hope – to protect humankind from all of the evils of the world. What Hope was doing in such bad company is a philosophical conundrum which has divided thinkers, writers, artists and spiritual leaders since the story was first recorded in the eighth century BC. Some see Hope as a punishment, just another evil in the box – a false promise of better things to come that could only prolong our torment. Others have suggested Hope was placed there as a gift from the gods to help us in our times of need.

This is how I feel about hope today. To me, it's our main shield and weapon against the problems in the world. Hope allows us to believe that things can get better, helping us to find a way through our dark times. I am certain of this. So I was sad and frustrated to find such a disconnection from hope

in our collective lives. Being hopeful does not come naturally to all of us – myself included. When times were tough (and they have been very tough) I had to fight to remind myself how important hope really is. I had to teach myself to look for it, to act on it, how to use it to make sure I kept on going. In time, it gradually became a habit. I've since found it easier to weather disappointment and to shrug off despair, to focus on the positives and the possibilities. There is always hope, you see.

One of the first things I discovered on this journey to hope was that I'm far from the first person to place upon it such a high value. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle thought that hope should be seen as a virtue as it makes a person courageous, giving us the confidence that things will turn out well if we take action, and the fear of what might happen if we do nothing. In the thirteenth century, the Catholic priest and philosopher Thomas Aquinas considered hope to be one of three Christian virtues, along with faith and love. He described it as a future good which was difficult but possible to attain, although he believed we needed God's help to achieve it. So, in terms of believing in the vital importance of hope, I'm in pretty good company.

Of course, it has not always been seen as a positive thing. In 1878, the philosopher Nietzsche argued for the alternative interpretation of the Pandora myth in his book *Human, All*

Too Human: 'Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man's torment.'

What a buzzkill.

I'll grant that it's an interesting thought, and I have conducted an imaginary argument with this long-dead German on several occasions. I've even looked up pictures of him in order to visualise the scene better. I have to admit that he sported a very impressive moustache. But I will not be deterred from holding on to hope as a force for good. I've imagined telling Nietzsche that I profoundly disagree with him: I don't think hope prolongs our torment, rather that it can end our despair – a torment in itself.

In my mind, I've always won my argument of course, but I was delighted to discover that it appears as though Nietzsche revisited his ideas about hope in later life. He admitted that hope does indeed have a transformative power that can make our lives better. As he wrote in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 'do not throw away the hero in your soul! Keep sacred your highest hope!'

It was in 2011 that it became clear to me that my own levels of hope were in need of some serious attention. I was at the Edinburgh Festival with a musical I had co-written

about nineteenth-century dentistry and the discovery of anaesthetics. It was a comedy (even though it doesn't sound like it). We were at the beginning of our run and we were all sitting bleary-eyed, with the obligatory mild hangovers of those festival days, in the City Cafe, one of my favourite places in Edinburgh. The news suddenly caught my eye. The television was on in the corner, but the sound was turned down, so all we took in were apocalyptic images. London was burning; the full-scale riots on screen looked like civil war.

It was horrible to be away from home at that time, to be worried about friends and neighbours and loved ones, to see pictures of buses on fire, people leaping from burning buildings and businesses destroyed. For me, it was the last straw. While I had been living my life, in my peripheral vision, almost out of sight, was my mounting fear and despair about climate change, sea levels rising, exploitation of the poor, racism, the growing lists of endangered and extinct species, sex trafficking, child abuse, and on and on. This stuff had been making me uneasy for so long. What could *I* – just one person with no power or influence – do about any one of these awful things, let alone all of them? What was the point of donating to WWF or Crisis when the problems of the world were so huge, insurmountable and hopeless? How was me wearing bloomers for a living while reciting comedic and disrespectful poetry about the royal family in a nightclub in Soho doing

anything to help make the world a better place? I concluded sadly that there was nothing I could do about the terrible mess we were in, and that bloomer-wearing and mucking about were all I could offer.

A few days later, on 18 August 2011, I was in the post office. The boy in front of me was talking to the man who worked behind the counter, explaining that he didn't have enough money to pay for his stamp for his driving licence application. When I gave him the 50p he needed, he thanked me tearfully. The man at the post office counter said, 'That was nice of you', and as I watched the boy walk out, an idea was beginning to form. Without a well-thought-out plan, and with my usual impulsiveness, I decided at that moment to try and do one kind thing for a stranger every single day for a year and to see, as I said to my partner Gareth when I arrived home, if 'kindness can change the world'.

Well, I can now report with confidence that this was, without a doubt, the best 50p I've ever spent. My life and my bruised heart were utterly transformed by this foolhardy endeavour. I practised kindness every day for those promised 366 days (it covered a leap year). I recognised pretty early on that this would become a lifelong thing: I would never be an 'expert', for there would always be more to learn, but it would keep giving me an abundance of joy. It was also, sometimes, a pain in the arse, when it didn't go according to plan

or when it resulted in unexpected minor injuries (such as doing my back in when helping someone with an extremely heavy case) or expense (when I offered to pay for someone's shopping without realising quite how much it would be). But most days it was amazing, and kindness became a part of who I am. So I kept going.

That year changed my life. Seeing that the world wasn't such a bad place reminded me of the importance of hope in dark times. I found that deciding to do something, and then actually doing it, can transform your life. I took action. They were not always successful actions, not always sensible actions, but actions nonetheless. And by taking action I carved a happy, meaningful, hopeful life.

Having said all of this, I also absolutely acknowledge that it is not always easy to 'do something', to recover from disappointments or to stop being scared. All we can do, at any one time, is our best, and I won't ask more of you (or myself) than that. I really do know how difficult life can be. Sometimes I forget to get dressed, spend all day in my pyjamas and then eat chocolate brownies for my dinner. Some days I am grumpy, even when the sky is blue. I have never, in any of the usual contemporary definitions of success – lots of money, possessions, power – been successful. I have suffered, as every human being has in their own way. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. I have been poor (like 'being a bit

hungry and not having much money for food', 'the soles are coming off my shoes so I'll glue them on', 'I'll sofa-surf for a few months' poor) and have experienced homelessness. I have felt defeated and sad and angry. I've spent all day crying on occasion and other days shouting at the terrible news on the TV in impotent rage.

However, I most definitely have blessings aplenty, and it does help to remember them. I've experienced the privilege of being born in and living in a democratic country with a social welfare system, free healthcare, free education and clean water. I have never experienced discrimination based on my race, ethnicity or nationality. I have good friends, a lovely partner and a family who are loving, supportive and dependable. I make a living doing what I love. I am an ordinary person who has had an extraordinary journey as I sought out hope in the face of despair. And along the way I've met some amazing people, uncovered projects all over the world doing incredible things and found an abundance of hope. I finished this journey joyfully, and I truly believe that you will too.

The hope I discovered in myself and in others was not the 'cross your fingers behind your back', 'thoughts and prayers', 'wish upon a star' kind of hope (not that I have anything against any of those things). Instead, this is the sort of hope that gives you strength, that helps you become more resilient

because it invites you to take action, however small, to move yourself towards it. This book is an invitation to start your own journey towards hope. You'll discover different treasures, encounter different pitfalls, face different fears than I have perhaps. You'll discover different answers and experience different pleasures on the way, because of course we are each unique, but I'll be keeping you company the whole time.

We're going to begin by looking at ourselves and our individual lives, finding ways to approach hope in our everyday and how we might hang onto it or create it in the most challenging of circumstances. We're going to explore how to find hope with others, through the communities we make or join, and how this can help us to take positive and hope-filled action further. And we're going to look at what all of this might mean for finding hope in the wider world and in our future.

To help us along the way, I've included practical exercises, ideas and tips, as well as questions you might like to consider. You may find some of them immediately inspiring, while others might help spark your own ideas that you'd prefer to follow. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, so pick and choose whatever suits you. You'll also find lesser-known historical stories of individual triumphs and reminders of times that have been fraught with challenge, when it looked

as though things could never get better (yet, lo and behold, they did). And while I quickly discovered that moving towards hope means confronting our fears along the way, I have kept things light-hearted wherever possible. I'm not going to shy away from the global challenges we are facing right here, right now, as well as the regular ones we all experience as part of being human: illness, death and things just being really tough sometimes. But please don't worry. This is a gentle book. I will be right here alongside you all the way. I promise you're in safe hands.

After that first year of kindness, my work and my life had changed hugely. I began lots of different creative projects with different communities, always with storytelling, kindness and hope at the heart. I believe that stories are one very powerful way that we make sense of being human, and that stories of kindness, triumph over adversity, courage, action and connectivity are among those that give us hope. So, this book is full of stories, real and imagined, true life and folk tales, stories from history and stories of an imagined future, the stories of where I found hope and how I learned to be hopeful. I believe that active hope increases the chances that our future can be better and our present lives happier. I hope that by sharing these stories I'll prove it to you.

I'd like to return briefly to Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope" is the thing with feathers', which I quoted at the

beginning of this introduction. In the next part of the poem she continues:

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –
And sore must be the storm –
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm –*

*I've heard it in the chilliest land –
And on the strangest Sea –
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.*

I love this poem. I imagine that little bird, Hope, helping us all to stay warm and comforting us. And yet, even if – as the poem says – she doesn't ask anything of us, I think it's time for us to offer something in return. As we set forth on our journey to find hope, let's make her this promise: we will take action, we will help ourselves, each other and our world. We will try to have courage, we will help each other to be brave. We will look for silver linings on the cloudiest of days. And I hope we will have lots of fun and find lots of joy along the way. Let's go . . .